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### Experimental Playing and Issues in Music History

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## Experimental Playing and Issues in Music History

### **Section 1:** Introduction to the attack on the value of experimental playing as a research tool

Recent scholarship in early music history has attacked the value and usage of experimental playing as a research tool. For example, Arnd Adje Both's article, "Music Archeology: Some Methodological and Theoretical Considerations," emphasizes the futility of employing experimental playing in archeomusicological studies.<sup>1</sup> Defining music archeology as the study of sounds and musical behaviors of the past, Both surveys a number of approaches to researching early music.<sup>2</sup> Experimental playing falls under Both's category of experimental archeology in which research is conducted through reconstructions of the past.<sup>3</sup> To conduct research through experimental playing specifically, one might for example play an instrument manufactured to be similar to those of the period.<sup>4</sup> Both does note that experimental playing is useful for testing hypothetical playing techniques and the capacities of ancient instruments.<sup>5</sup> However, Both concludes with a discussion about how experimental playing is a "difficult" research process predicated on the idea that statistical methods must be used alongside experimental playing in order to achieve verifiable results.<sup>6</sup> Because statistical methods rely on data collected from significant amounts of discovered archeological material—significant amounts being rare and in some cases impossible to find—experimental playing becomes a difficult way to conduct research if it must be done in conjunction with statistical analysis.<sup>7</sup> By concluding with his argument that experimental playing is a difficult research method, Both

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<sup>1</sup> Arnd Adje Both, "Music Archeology: Some Methodological and Theoretical Considerations," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 41 (2009): 1–11, doi:10.2307/S0740155800004100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

posits the idea that experimental playing has no inherent value to the field of music archeology unless it can be used in tandem with other archeological evidence.

Both's position can be traced back to scholarship from the late twentieth century. The article, "Ethnomusicology and the Prehistoric Southwest," by Donald Brown argues that while the context of music can be reconstructed through archeological and ethnomusicological study, musical style—that is, the actual sound produced by past cultures—cannot.<sup>8</sup> Brown therefore does not comment on the style of prehistoric Southwest music but works instead to illuminate how found instruments and artifacts illustrate the links between music and its sociocultural backdrop. Brown explicitly does not use experimental playing to discover past musical styles as Brown does not believe that even experimental playing used in tandem with advanced statistical methods can be used as evidence for one musical style or another.<sup>9</sup> In his words, "Even the most skillful analysis of the sounds which can be produced by prehistoric sound-producing instruments cannot lead to the definition of musical style on those instruments."<sup>10</sup> In this way, Brown's position on experimental playing is harsher than Both's—experimental playing does not have value as a research method by itself or when combined with other archeological evidence. Interestingly, Bruno Nettl's book, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*,<sup>11</sup> is integral to both Both's and Brown's arguments—both authors reference Nettl when talking about the possibility of reconstructing past music. Because Nettl, Brown, and Both seem particularly interested in the accuracy of past music reconstructions and Brown and Both agree that experimentally playing

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<sup>8</sup> Donald N. Brown, "Ethnomusicology and the Prehistoric Southwest," *Ethnomusicology* 15, no. 3 (1971): 363–78, doi:10.2307/850636.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Nettl, *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (Glencoe: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

instruments will not necessarily lead to an accurate representation of past music, experimental playing becomes a relatively worthless exercise in a music history context.

However, as I show in this essay, experimental playing does have value as an exercise in music archeology and music history more generally. Because experimental playing does have value, these articles' attacks on it illuminate multiple problems with how music history is approached as an academic field today. I focus on two of the issues that must be examined if we are to develop a more accurate conceptual understanding of what music history is and how it should be approached.

## **Section 2:** Issues concerning the overrepresentation of visual data and linguistic models in historical fields

The view of experimental playing as worthless places sonic data in archeological research in a subservient position to data that is acquired visually or from written sources. In other words, this view prescribes that only when data is acquired from surveying historic sites, recovered artifacts, and written documents should a researcher play prehistoric instruments because only then will a researcher be able to (possibly) reconstruct a (potentially) verifiable version of past music. Researchers may use experimental playing to test the sound capacities of instruments, but this work may not be used as evidence for reconstructions of musical style. To sum up, visual data should be the primary focus of early archeomusicological research.

However, this research standard is outdated because it lends itself to the construction of theoretical and linguistic models of the past rather than an understanding of the broader lived experiences of ancient peoples. Across the humanities, abstract linguistic models of the past take precedence over representations of the past's physical and material nature.<sup>12</sup> Because of the

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<sup>12</sup> Nicole Boivin, et al., "Sensual, Material, and Technological Understanding: Exploring Prehistoric Soundscapes in South India," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007): 267–94, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00428.x.

Western bias towards visual data, leading to the construction of such models, Nicole Boivin et al. show that this oversaturation “has left us with no past sounds (or, indeed, other non-visual sensations), to imagine at all.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, historians and archeologists become divorced from the materiality of the past because they do not explore the sensory experiences of past peoples. This is obvious to me on a practical level as a scholar of music history. The academic journals that I use to study music history, learn about the experiences of past peoples, and find relevant information for this paper contain no sounds whatsoever. Relying solely on words and pictures to learn about the past, I can conceptualize what the past may have been like in an abstract way. But without a sonic analog, there is no way for me to truly and intuitively understand the qualities of past sounds as sounds must be heard in order to be fully understood. It is for this reason that music history courses make a point to play recordings of past music or reconstructions of that music rather than use solely words, pictures, and scores to study the music of the past—these methods fail to fully convey the impact that hearing sound provides. When scholars rely on visual methods of exploring the past, leading to the creation of models of the past that are abstract and linguistically based, scholars limit their understanding of what the past was like in a material sense.

Experimental playing would constitute one way for researcher-scholars to explore the material past in a material way as researchers would be forced to physically interact with instruments of the past as peoples of the past did themselves. Though its use may not result in verifiably accurate reconstructions of past sounds, the use of experimental playing as a research exercise would provide a sonic and kinesthetic link to the past, aiding scholars’ understanding of it and combating the West’s bias towards visual data and linguistic models. Because

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 269.

experimentally playing instruments would help to combat music history's visual bias as a non-visual sensory method of exploring the past, experimental playing is valuable to any historical music field.

Considering that experimental playing does have value, that it is attacked as a research tool highlights music history's preoccupation with reconstructing only verifiable musical sounds and styles. As previously discussed, the placement of sonic data in a subservient position to visual data happens because only then can researchers (possibly) reconstruct a (potentially) verifiable version of past music. This further implies that nothing besides attaining a historically accurate performance on an instrument is interesting or valuable to the field of music archeology. Because experimental playing can help scholars better understand the past by giving them a material link to that world, it is obvious that limiting the scope of music history only to verifiably accurate sounds, styles, and performance practices limits scholars' understanding of the past. Thus, the study of music history should be redefined to include experimental playing and other such present-day explorations into past worlds whether or not they result verifiably accurate reconstructions.

In addition to allowing scholars a better understanding of the material nature of the past, this expansion of music history would also help to provide context for sounds and styles historians are able to reconstruct. Oftentimes, this context comes in the form of comparing continuity and change over time between reconstructed sounds but may also come in the form of examining what is absent from the ideas, developments, and other things of a period. By experimentally playing instruments to arrive at possible performance practices that could have been used in a time period given the instrumental capabilities of the day but were not, there is more context for historians to understand and judge historically correct performance practices.

To conclude, though some scholars suggest that experimental playing is not valuable to music archeology because it cannot arrive at historically accurate performance practices on its own, experimental playing is valuable to music archeology and students of the field.

Experimental playing both illuminates the capabilities of instruments to provide context for accurate performance practices and combats the idea that the past is a visual or theoretical construct by providing a material way to interact with that world. Moreover, because the goals of music archeology are not<sup>14</sup> limited to just the finding of the most historically accurate performance practices of the past, it is imperative that archeomusicologists not dismiss research methods that do not lend themselves to that specific goal. It is this way that music archeology can paint a broader, more tangible, and ultimately more interesting window to the music and sounds of the past.

**Section 3:** Issues concerning the idea that doing music history is a solely uncovering, objective process and not creative or participatory

Discarding experimental playing in favor of reconstructing only verifiable musical sounds and styles can also be attributed to the idea that music history is “out there” in the world, waiting to be uncovered by scholars as new musical artifacts are discovered. In this view, the present does not have any bearing on the past—researchers and scholars are the objective observers of a series of facts that serve to create the historical narrative. Experimental playing has no place in a field that can be pieced together fact by fact since the sounds created through experimental playing are only factually sounds of the present, not the past. Because experimental playing does not lead to the creation of verifiable past sounds and so does not teach scholars anything about what the facts of the past are, experimental playing can be said to have nothing to offer music history.

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<sup>14</sup> Or at least, should not be.

While it is partially true that music history is “out there” in that facts form the foundation of music history, the linkage and interpretation of those facts is done by music historians to create the actual history of music history. This makes music history an inherently participatory process. In short, music history is necessarily participatory since it is created by those who study it. This is clear after an examination of how the modern historical narrative of music history formed over time. Vivaldi’s name today, for example, is ingrained in the Western canon—anyone who studies the Baroque period even at an elementary level will know who Antonio Vivaldi was and what his basic achievements were. But this is a historically recent development. Before the rediscovery of Vivaldi’s music, a process that occurred from the mid-1920s through following the end of World War II, Vivaldi was largely forgotten and rarely performed.<sup>15</sup> Vivaldi would not have been known to the extent he is known today, if at all, to music historians of the 1920s and earlier, yet they still had constructed a cohesive historical narrative. From this example, it can be said that the narrative of music history changes depending on what music historians know about the past, and more broadly that music historians play a significant role in creating the history they study. This occurs when historians discover new evidence concerning the past (e.g. Vivaldi’s scores) or are influenced to shift their understanding of the past by present sociocultural attitudes and biases. Antisemitism in Germany, for instance, led to the suppression of Mendelssohn’s works, though he had been renowned earlier as a great composer.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, recent feminist movements have led to renewed interest in female composers and their music, generating scholarship on previously unknown figures.<sup>17</sup> Music

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<sup>15</sup> Miles Dayton Fish, “Discovering the Rediscovery of Antonio Vivaldi,” *Choral Journal* 55, no. 10 (2015): 21.

<sup>16</sup> “Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy – a Lutheran-Jewish Composer,” ClassicFM, accessed December 9, 2019. <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/mendelssohn/guides/felix-mendelssohn-bartholdy-jewish-question/>.

<sup>17</sup> Susan McClary, “Reshaping a Discipline: Musicology and Feminism in the 1990s,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993): 399–423, doi:10.2307/3178376.



history, and history more generally, is participatory in that scholars create historical narratives based on their present conceptions of both past and present.

Because music history not just an objective process of piecing facts together, centrifugal methods of studying music history are essential to understanding it and ascertaining its broader significance. In the essay, “Teaching Historical Analysis through Creative Writing Assignments,” Janine Larmon Peterson and Lea Graham define two methods of approaching history through creative writing:

The first is centripetally, or via an inward-pulling force, which asks students to go ‘back’ in time, to step outside one’s own experience, and imagine oneself in a specific historical context. The second is centrifugally, or via an outward-driving force, which asks students to project general ideas or themes of the text into a larger context, and thus to discover points of reference in which the concerns or values of the past resonate with those of the present.<sup>18</sup>

Peterson and Graham give the example of a centripetal project where students collaborate to write a Medieval European hero’s tale in the context of medieval Europe and the centrifugal assignment where students expand Voltaire’s *Candide* in chapters that apply his critiques to modern society.<sup>19</sup> In a music history-specific context, a centrifugal creative writing assignment might be given in which students are tasked with reinterpreting the narrative of an opera in a modern context.<sup>20</sup> Professor Alexander Stefaniak notes that such assignment help students understand both that their interpretations of the music are contingent on a number of personal and cultural factors and that his students are “creatively empowered, (re)interpretive performers and listeners in their own right.”<sup>21</sup> Centrifugal methods of study in this way show how one is

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<sup>18</sup> Janine Larmon Peterson, and Lea Graham, “Teaching Historical Analysis through Creative Writing Assignments,” *College Teaching* 63 no. 4 (2015): 153, doi:10.1080/87567555.2015.1052725.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 153–61.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Stefaniak, “Remaking the Canon in their Own Images: Creative-Writing Projects in the Music History Classroom,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 9 no. 2 (2019): 198, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/292>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

positioned to participate in the creation of music history. First, they require that students recognize that their view of the past is subjective based on a number of personal and cultural factors. Second, by asking students to dialogue with the past from that viewpoint, centrifugal methods empower students to critique the historical narrative they have been taught. To sum up, centrifugal assignments remind students they are never simply objective observers of music history, uncovering a wholly correct version of the past. Rather, they are subjective authorities on what correct history is, and their judgements of the past are reflective of who they are in the present. Centrifugal assignments are essential in that they remind students and scholars alike on a practical level that music history is a participatory, creative act.

Experimental playing is valuable in this view because it constitutes a centrifugal method of studying the past. To borrow Peterson and Graham's definition of centripetal vs. centrifugal and expand it to cover to all assignments, a centripetal assignment would require students to accept a taught historical narrative and demonstrate their understanding of it while a centrifugal assignment would require students to take history out of context to demonstrate an understanding of broader themes that connect their present to the past. In music, a centripetal method of studying history might be to give a historically accurate performance of a piece using verifiable reconstructed playing styles while a centrifugal method of study would be to experimentally play a reconstructed instrument. Because experimental playing necessitates that the experimenter bring his own viewpoint of how to play an instrument, what an instrument should sound like, what an instrument is, and ideas about how an instrument could be played to the experiment, experimental playing—like Stefaniak's centrifugal creative writing assignment—asks the researcher to enter into active dialogue with the past about those perspectives. Because it is those

perspectives that shape scholars' understanding of what correct music history is, experimental playing provides a valuable method of studying the interplay between past and present.

That experimental methods of studying past music are discarded by historians in favor of those that will guarantee verifiable results lends itself to the false notion that music history is something that can be passively and objectively uncovered fact by fact, statistic by statistic. This is not to say that facts and statistics have no place in music history. On the contrary, they form the foundation on which the history of music is built. However, without remembering that the creatures building that history are biased, subjective, and *human*, it is not possible to see music history for what it is—a reflection of the present just as much as it is a narrative about the past. Experimental playing as well as other centrifugal methods that force us to interact directly with the past can serve as reminders of this truth as well as illuminate exactly how this relationship works. Moreover, music historians must collectively realize that the study of this relationship is part of music history since it has serious ramifications for what historical narrative of music is ultimately constructed, studied, and taught.

#### **Section 4: Conclusion**

Acknowledging the value of experimental playing in the study of music history illuminates several issues in the field of music history as a whole, two of which were discussed in this essay. I recommend that to combat the problems resulting from these issues, music historians should not discount the value of research methods that do not lead directly to verifiable reconstructions of the past. Instead, experimental playing and other such methods may be used to give historians material links to the past. They may also elucidate in what ways the present is central to how the past is interpreted and history is constructed. Once these problems in music history are directly confronted, music historians may begin to tell a tale of history more truthful, accurate, and authentic to whatever it is that music history is truly about.

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